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Developing systemic design tools: The CHRIIS model

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Developing Systemic Design Tools
The CHRIIS Model

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Abstract

Due in no small part to the efforts of RSD organizers and participants (e.g., Nelson & Stolerman, 2012; Sevaldson & Jones, 2013) , systemic design has emerged as a powerful approach to responding to major challenges and aspirations. I suggest that tools can be developed to make the approach more widely accessible, increase its impact, and preserve much of its power when engaged in with little or no expert facilitation. Such tools should be able to simultaneously help people design and help them gain design competence. I describe such a tool, called CHRIIS, that strengthens design actions and objects.

Introduction

It was a pleasure to join my fellow presenters Joanna Boehnert and Ryan Murphy, and to learn together with the many attendees at RSD8. The work I shared concerns systemic design tools. There are simply not enough systemic designers to meet the challenges faced by humanity. Would it help to develop tools that introduce systemic design to those without expertise in the area, tools that allow them to engage in basic processes to improve their situation, and perhaps get them interested in more sophisticated approaches that experts could facilitate? Below I describe a model that I have been developing that may be considered one such tool and offer examples of its use, mostly in academic program development. I start with the story of the model's origin.

Origin of CHRIIS

A decade ago, I attended a wedding off the coast of Maine. Before the ceremony we were asked to take a word from a hat and to find some object on the island that would represent that word. Then we were to place the object on an alter as a gift to the couple.

To my surprise, the word I chose was **transform**. I have spent thirty years studying design and transformative learning, and I wondered what I could find that would not just repeat what I already knew. And what object would represent that?

As I walked along a trail through the forest pondering the challenge, I came across a downed birch tree. It was chewed apart at the base, leading me to infer that it had been felled by beavers. I examined it further and realized that it was beautiful, as beautiful as the standing trees around it, but in a different way. This caused me to think about cycles of creation and destruction, and the beauty throughout. I realized in the moment that seeing beauty in what is or was, is essential to creating what might or ought to be. In other words, for participants in designing, **honoring** the good in the situation and in ourselves is necessary to **releasing** the ties that bind us to the status quo. Releasing those ties frees us to **imagine** what might be and to **create** the new. I was seeing the cycle of life, in this case of a tree, as a **sustained** cycle of systemic design.

This felt profound. But what object would I take back for the alter? I searched for something that suggested a cycle, mostly circular shapes that did not feel quite right. The cycle was more evolutionary and did not return one to the same place. I walked on, and at the end of the trail I came to the shoreline and to a cabin where Mabel Loomis Todd had edited Emily Dickinson's poems. On the mantle of the fireplace in the cabin, I found an S-shaped link of chain. That was it. It was like an infinity symbol, but with ends not meeting, suggesting entry and exit at different places. I did not want to take the link, so I traced it with charcoal from the fireplace onto a piece of paper. I added the concepts that had come to mind as forming the cycle: honor, release, imagine, create, and sustain. Then as I reversed course and came to the birch tree, I saw that the bark could be peeled and shaped into the S. I took the paper and the bark back to place on the alter. And then I realized that the words, if slightly reordered, could be recalled with the acronym CHRIS. Chris was the name of the groom.

Assumptions underlying CHRIIS

I have developed the model quite a bit since then and added a second "I." I have come to think that it might be a tool that others can use. But why develop and share yet another design model? Because I have recognized that in developing CHRIIS I have made different assumptions than others, particularly different from those made in typical models of planned change in organizations (where much of my work lies).

Models of planned change, like Kotter's (2014) 8S model, Lewin's (1947) process of unfreeze, change, and freeze, Dormant's (2011) CACOA, and Rogers' (2003) model of diffusion of innovations all appear to assume such things as the following:

> People resist change.
> People avoid challenge.
> The future is determined by others (i.e., leaders).

Extrapolating from these, in thinking about change we typically also appear to assume that:

> Only special people are creative.
> Experts/leaders should make the big decisions.
> Change necessarily means a loss of identity.
> It is ethical to bring about change in and for others.

Instead, like others working in systemic design, I have assumed the following:

> People do not resist change; they resist change that is imposed on them.
> People relish challenges that are aligned with their values and potentially enhance their self-worth.
> We can meaningfully impact our own future.
> We can develop our creativity through intentional practice.
> People have a fundamental right to participate in decisions that affect them.
> Change can mean simultaneous transformation and deepened identity.
> It is ethical to design *with* others; even more so to design *within.*

My hope is that CHRIIS, based on the latter assumptions, can help individuals and organizations engage in self-design. It's been very successful, to date as a facilitated process. Hopefully in the future it will be

something people can use on their own—perhaps at a larger scale and/or asynchronously in something like open social mapping. It is a work in progress, and I welcome feedback.

The CHRIIS Model

Figure 1 is the latest version of the model. The first letters of the actions spell CHRIIS. To remember the acronym, think "CHRIIS has two I's." CHRIIS involves a series of activities for a group or individual to engage in, each initiated by a triggering question(s). The logic is clearer when reversed, for example, "in order to imagine ideals, it is necessary to release assumptions that maintain the status quo." Or "in order to release assumptions (or engage in any other activity), it is necessary to honor values."

Figure 1. The CHRIIS Model.
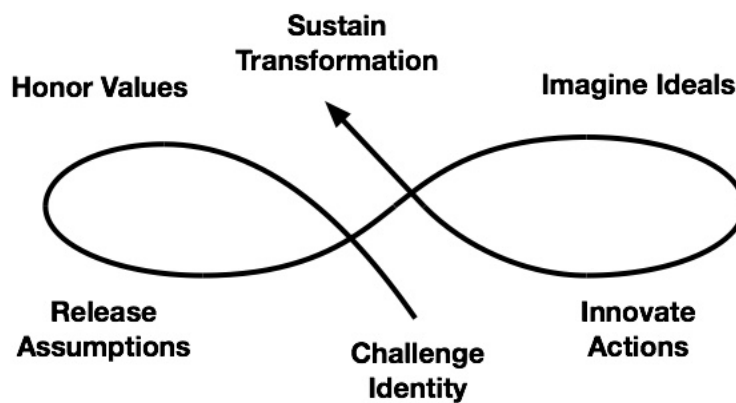
As you can see in Table 1, each of the action statements has an action and an object. And each asks a different question and emphasizes a different type of inquiry, that is, a different way of being with one another. So, applying CHRIIS is an attempt to answer the questions by engaging participants in activities associated with different types of inquiry.

Table 1. CHRIIS actions, objects, questions, and types of inquiry.

Action	challenge	honor	release	imagine	innovate	sustain
Object	identity	values	assumptions	ideals	actions	transformation
Question	who are we (state of being)	what should be	what is true	what might be ideal	what will we make real	who are we becoming
Type of inquiry; way of being with one another	psychological introspection	philosophical dialogue	scientific exploration	designerly play	policy/political debate	systems inquiry

I have also been playing with different properties of each stage, even connecting to Native American medicine wheels (see Appendix A). I am not sure where this will lead. Importantly, it is not a "one-and-done" process. Rather it is an evolutionary cycle, leading to greater complexity (see figure 2). Like any transformative learning experience, it leads to simultaneous deepening of identity and transformation. And it recognizes that collaboration—working for mutual benefit—is a stronger evolutionary strategy than competition and survival of the fittest.

Figure 2. CHRIIS sustained.
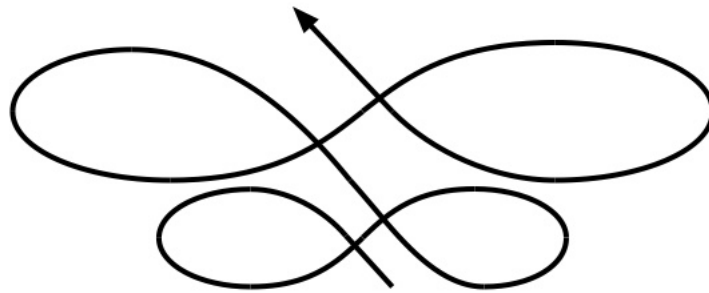
Examples

Thus far I have used the model mostly in academic program development. The examples I will describe below come from applications with academic programs at two higher education institutions. Each application took about eight hours—a full day or two half-days. The key task is turning the action statements into triggering questions for inquiry.

Below are the questions I used with two groups. Both were questioning the direction of their programs. One sought to determine how to revitalize an undergraduate program. The other asked whether a graduate program should be restarted and redesigned.

> Challenge Identity: *Why are we engaging in this conversation?*
> Honor Values: *What is so central to the program that without it the program would not exist?*
> Release Assumptions: *What have you consciously or unconsciously been assuming to be set in stone but could actually change?*
> Imagine Ideals: *Five years from now the program is shockingly successful. What is happening?*
> Innovate Actions: *What actions will bring about the desired, attainable future?*
> Sustain Transformation: *What key questions will strengthen parts and relationships of the inquiry system?*

Each question initiates an activity in which group members attempt to be with each other in different ways: introspection, dialogue, exploration, play, etc. For example, for the Release Assumptions stage, the groups adopted a more scientific lens in examining what they had been assuming and what could happen that would cause that to change.

These different ways of being with one another are not exclusive. Rather one tends to be more primary in each stage. Also, each stage can involve a series of steps and borrowed techniques. For example, in the two cases described here, Imagine Ideals used a variety of design methods/techniques from the

literature, followed by three groups sharing ideal images. Descriptions of the three ideals were then hung on the wall in a large triangle, and individuals placed post-it notes with their names on them inside the triangle at locations that reflected the image(s) to which they were attracted. This enabled a conversation that led to consensus on an integrated image.

"Inquiry system" in the Sustain Transformation stage refers to the set of objects, illustrated in Figure 3. The concept here is to sustain transformation and continue the cycle by developing key questions that evaluate and strengthen each object and important relationships between them. For example, "Are our ideals constrained by assumptions that we found we could release?" and "Are our actions consistent with our values?" This is akin to Bela Banathy's (1996) concept of an evolutionary guidance system or EGS.

Figure 3. CHRIIS objects.
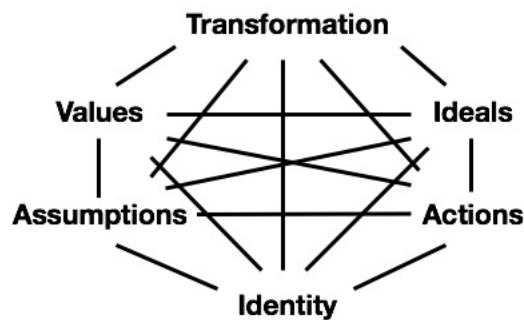
Another example of applying CHRIIS is from a graduate course I teach each summer. The course is for a small cohort of returning students seeking a change in their careers. During a residency weekend, I ask members to respond individually to a series of questions based on CHRIIS. The purpose is to help the group come together as a cohort, that is, to move from individuals pursuing their own goals to a group of members helping one another.

> Challenge Identity: *Name five groups to which you belong. How would it alter your sense of identity if the least important of these became the most important?*
> Honor Values: *What do you bring to the table? What stops you? What is your greatest fear? Where do you find great beauty?*
> Release Assumptions: *What did you assume was preventing change in a past situation from which you walked out?*
> Imagine Ideals: *What accomplishments over the next five years would lead you to experience great joy?*
> Innovate Actions: *What will you do to bring one of these about?*
> Sustain Transformation: *How will you help each other persevere throughout the program?*

Beyond these examples, my overall idea is to create banks of questions for each stage, perhaps in coherent sets, that people can choose from before and as they use the model.

Next

Again, this is a work in progress. As I think about the model's continued development, I recognize that there are conditions in which it may work well, and other conditions in which it will not (e.g., it would be seen as idealized and unrealistic). Some of the former include the following: openness to trying a

different approach based on atypical assumptions; willingness to engage in an inclusive process and to suspend hierarchy; readiness to collaborate; no predetermined path that those with power will insist upon; and time for deep work. In contrast, if the situation demands "facilitating acceptance," for example, a mid-level manager charged with implementing a change decided upon by an executive, then CHRIIS would be a poor choice.

Also concerning the model's future, a few questions come to mind. The first two challenge assumptions.

• Do we, at times, resist change that is imposed not by others but by ourselves? If so, would it help to incorporate strategies associated with concepts like "immunity to change" (Kegan & Lahey, 2009)?

• Under what conditions might a change be sustainable if it involves transformation and loss of identity (as opposed to simultaneous transformation and deepening of identity)?

Other questions step back to the theme of the conference.

• Is CHRIIS a systemic design tool? I think so in terms of using systemics as the logics of design (Nelson, 2018), and seeing the designers (inquirers) as essential parts of the designing system (e.g., Glanville, 2014). On the other hand, the triggering questions and activities could give greater priority to impact in the larger system.

• Is it fruitful to attempt to create tools that help people engage in systemic design when they have little or no prior experience? I think so. Spreading systemic design solely through creating a next generation of skilled designers will not be sufficient to address crises we face. And maybe tools like these can open the door and invite many to explore systemic design. Bela Banathy (1996) referred to this as design literacy and design competence leading to design culture. He also emphasized that designing *within* is most ethical, and I would like to see if CHRIIS can move from designing *with* others to *within* (i.e., see how well it works without my facilitation).

With such a move in mind, the form in which the model is shared is an important consideration. I cannot expect those outside the systemic design community to find, understand, and apply the model from proceedings like these or other scholarly publications. Rather, I am working with my colleague Trudy Wilson at the University of Southern Maine on a text-image version that we will share in print and/or online.

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Appendix

Basic enabling human quality	courage	awareness	curiosity	creativity	ingenuity	love
Dimension	consciousness	beauty (emotional – the heart)	truth (intellectual – the mind)	wellness (physical -the body)	goodness (spiritual - the soul	wholeness
Direction	inward	behind (past)	left	right	forward (future)	outward
Element	mother Earth	fire/sun	water	earth	air	father sky